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SUBJECT: INITIAL REACTION TO 2006 IRF REPORT

¶1. (U) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Mikhail Kaminin told reporters that the 2006 International Religious Freedom Report amounted to a repetition of groundless claims that there are restrictions on religious freedom in Russia. He said that U.S. officials had repeatedly ignored GOR explanations to the point that the GOR considered further explanations superfluous. Kaminin alleged that the report was politically motivated.

¶2. (U) Noting some improvements in this year's edition, the Moscow Patriarchate remarked that the report still lacked objectivity. In an Interfax interview on September 25, Deputy Head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate Vsevolod Chaplin remarked that "in comparison to previous years, the report of the State Department was more accurate in terms of facts and assessments." He also noted that it was a pleasant surprise that the report finally mentioned some anti-Orthodox acts of vandalism, but that the number of those incidents was insignificant in comparison to the description of acts directed against religions that have large and influential constituencies in the U.S., such as Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and "new religious movements." He added that while the report addressed the property restitution problems of the Russian Orthodox Church, they were disproportionate to the restitution problems of other religious communities. He even admitted that the report was correct in noting the need for improvements in conditions for Muslims' prayer activities and access to religious advisors in the army.

¶3. (U) Chaplin argued that Russia is only asserting what is the norm in Europe: "a society's selective attitude towards religious communities." He said that in most European countries both state and society have always understood that some religious organizations have grounds for special support, while others "could be considered destructive and dangerous, based on their activities and ideology." Chaplin also maintained that local populations have the right to decide which religious buildings could be built in their districts and to whom local authorities can grant community space for religious meetings, as well as the right of citizens to a religious education and the right to protest against the activities of certain religious groups they considered sects.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT. The tone of the MFA's response to the 2006 report does not differ markedly from its response last year. We are still waiting for the translation of the report into Russian to be finished. We will then review it with additional interlocutors in the GOR and human rights and religious communities.
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